

Gen Z Attitudes Towards American Democracy and Reform

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ABSTRACT

Political scientists have expressed concern about the current state of democracy in the United States, which is widely regarded as a pioneer in the modern democratic world. This study focuses on three institutional practices and systems—gerrymandering, the Electoral College, and Misinformation/hate speech—that are deemed detrimental to democracy/undemocratic and in need of reform. While Gen Zers (born between 1997-2012) are projected to become a significant voting bloc in future elections, there is limited research on their political opinions. To gauge the attitudes and preferences of Gen Zers regarding American democracy and potential institutional/practice reforms, a survey of 215 participants was conducted. The findings indicate that the majority of Gen Zers express concern about the state of democracy and are open to the idea of reform, although they do not strongly support any specific reform. Respondents displayed significant support for reforming gerrymandering, while opinions on reforming the Electoral College and addressing Misinformation/hate speech were divided along partisan lines. A subsequent focus group highlighted the participants' emphasis on the importance of civic engagement and media literacy education in high schools, as well as the need for more comprehensive local and federal curricular mandates.

Introduction

Democracy - "government by the people" - has been an emblem of the United States' principles of freedom and equality ever since the nation's founding in 1776. America has been at the forefront of the democratic governing system, being the first modern model in the world's history; today, more than half of countries are democratic (Desilver, 2019). So, it might come as a surprise that "the United States is now the world's most unequal long-standing democracy in the developed world" (Stepan and Linz, 2011). In a similar vein, the Democracy Index Report, concluded that American democracy has consistently been deemed as "flawed" since 2016.

Though the support for preserving democracy has been assumed to be well established among Americans, the state of America's democracy has proven otherwise. In 2021, the International IDEA Think Tank, basing its assessments on 50 years of democratic indicators, added the United States to the list of the democracies that were "backsliding" as a result of "visible deterioration" (IDEA, 2021). In addition, America's extreme partisan divide has placed it in the perilous area of "pernicious polarization." A recent study indicated that the United States' polarization rate was among the highest out of the 52 countries surveyed (McCoy and Press, 2022). The United States is the only advanced Western democracy to have remained in such a polarized state for an extended period, which places it in uncharted and potentially hazardous territory.

Political scientists in the United States are gravely concerned about the decay of democracy, the deep-rooted inequalities that pervade its institutions, and the pernicious polarization that threatens to unravel it. To tackle these challenges, experts have called for immediate action, suggesting democratizing institutional reforms and electoral mobilization by the dominant and opposing parties as two potential depolarization strategies (McCoy and Press, 2022). Such democratic reforms can take various forms, ranging from promoting equity in electoral mobilization to depolarizing and curbing extremism, and can strengthen democracy and prevent its dismantling.

Public perception is critical to the implementation of democratic reforms because state and federal representatives are generally expected to act in the interests of their constituents. If there is a plurality of support for democratic reforms in the nation, they are more likely to be implemented legislatively. Alternatively, many states also have a ballot initiative process to enable reforms through citizen signatures, bypassing the need for legislative reforms. However, despite evidence of strong support for democracy, a study conducted in 2020 revealed that only a small percentage of Americans, ranging from 10-13% of respondents, would prioritize democratic principles over a favored candidate when voting (Graham and Slovik, 2020). While the vast majority of Americans value democracy, their support is not robust enough, as only a fraction of them would cross partisan lines to choose democracy. It is essential to note however that national opinion polls, such as the one above, only gather analysis from the general adult population. Currently, there is no comprehensive research on the attitudes toward democracy of the Generation Z American population.

The generation born from 1997 to 2012, referred to as Generation Z, is poised to become the future of American politics. The 2020 election witnessed the highest voter turnout rate amongst youth (ages 18-29), setting a new record in modern politics (Tufts CIRCLE, 2021). Predictive trends indicate that by 2024, Generation Z and Millennials combined will constitute the largest voting bloc in the United States. Thus, it is imperative to investigate the attitudes of Generation Z towards safeguarding democracy, partisan polarization, institutional inequity, election and democratic processes, and democratic reforms. Currently, there is a dearth of research, which presents a significant gap in the political knowledge regarding Generation Z's attitudes towards democracy. The research question of utmost importance is: What are Generation Z's attitudes towards reforming US democratic principles and practices to mitigate polarization, promote political equity, and prevent democratic erosion?

Literature Review

The research question is grounded in three main areas of existing scholarly literature. First, scholarship on specific threats to democracy and contentious practices in the general political discourse help identify how existing practices potentially impact American democracy or contribute to polarization and inequality. Second, perspectives on potential solutions and democratic reforms from political scientists and other scholars offer insights into what reforms might improve our democracy. Third, a small body of research about the political perceptions of Gen Z populations provide some generalized observations about this demographic group.

Examining the Threats to Democracy

For the United States, three practices emerge as factors that hurt democracy: Gerrymandering, the Electoral College, and misinformation/hate speech. The first two impact fairness in the representation and participation of voters, while the third alters and polarizes their views. All three are candidates for reform and change.

Gerrymandering, endemic in the US, is redistricting and manipulating electoral boundaries to give an unfair advantage to a political party (Sarra, 2022). Voters belonging to the opposing party or minorities might be “cracked” across several single-member districts to dilute their representation. On the other hand, “packing” them into overly concentrated districts into few districts also reduces their representation (La Raja, 2009). Redistricting can help parties improve the proportion of seats they win relative to their vote share and can help increase the electoral safety of incumbents - likely a contributor to significant increase in the reelection rate of House incumbents. Not only does gerrymandering contribute to parties winning or losing legislature seats, thus decreasing electoral accountability, but there are long term impacts to the quality of the democratic process due to decreasing quality of the candidates and participation of ordinary voters (Stephanopoulos and Warshaw, 2020).

Equal representation of voters is also potentially impeded by the use of the Electoral College system for presidential elections, which fails to uphold the principle of one person, one vote (Akhil Reed Amar, 2001). The ballots that Americans cast don't directly elect the President, as the Electoral College embraces the "winner takes all" electoral system, where states award all their electoral votes to the popular vote-winning candidate in their state, discounting many non-majority votes. This electoral process has occasionally led to undemocratic outcomes, as exemplified by the winners of the 2016 and 2000 presidential elections, who lost the popular vote, raising questions about the legitimacy of their mandate to govern the country (Edwards III, 2019). Moreover, although the electoral college system is intended to ensure candidates pay attention to the entire country, including smaller states, candidates often ignore smaller and uncompetitive states and instead focus on a few large "battleground" states.

Another significant threat to democracy is the interplay between hate speech and misinformation, which, although broadly protected by the First Amendment, can significantly harm the democratic process, particularly in the age of digital and social media. Misinformation, or "fake news," comprises unsupported assertions that usually spread on the internet, often about politics, and can influence how people vote and perceive the truth (Finnegan, 2021). Hate speech further exacerbates extremist rhetoric and polarization; Combined, misinformation and hate speech pose a massive threat to the democratic process by disseminating harmful language, channeling dysfunction and pernicious dissonance to the socio-political national condition. Given the prevalence of misinformation and hate speech on major broadcasting channels and social media, preventing further harm to democracy, such as the Capitol Riot on January 6th, 2022, is an imperative for many.

Solutions and Potential Reforms

First, consider potential solutions to gerrymandering. A popular reform is the use of independent commissions for redistricting. These commissions take the power to draw district boundaries away from state legislatures and place them with commissions, which can be either citizens or bipartisan political appointees. Commissions can reduce the likelihood of a partisan gerrymander and reduce sweetheart deals for incumbents that give them safe districts that limit accountability to voters (Cain, 2012). Others have proposed using computational algorithms as a way to assist in reducing partisan stakes and drawing more impartial district boundaries. This mixed solution recommends that humans justify and develop criteria and then use computational code to redistrict lines (Guest, Kanayet, Love, 2019).

With regards to electoral reform to tackle the issues with the Electoral College, there are two paths of reform: a Constitutional Amendment or a workaround through the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact. A constitutional amendment to abolish the Electoral College might be the most direct solution, but is generally seen as infeasible. It would require significant bipartisan support in the US Congress that seems unlikely currently and ratification by the states. An effort in 1970 nearly succeeded: an amendment to the constitution was passed by the House but got filibustered at the Senate (Roos, 2020). An alternate solution is that enough states switch to the National Popular Vote Interstate Compact (NPVIC), which is an agreement among states to award all their electoral votes to whichever presidential candidate wins the overall popular vote (Feerick, 2021). However, this approach also would require consent from the US Congress.

Finally, government regulation to control misinformation or hate speech is unlikely as not much can be done constitutionally because of the First Amendment jurisprudence (Stone-Erdman, 2022). Other reasonable proposed solutions include better regulating social media companies and the algorithms they use and increasing the quality and investments in Corporate Public Broadcasting to raise media standards (Finnegan, 2021).

Whether it be electoral reforms to counter impacts of gerrymandering and the Electoral College or tackling "fake news" and hate speech, scholars have proposed creative solutions that range from constitutional amendments to more creative and practical actions. However, these reforms will only carry weight if people believe in their potential and purpose, which is why it is vital to determine the climate of public opinion regarding them.

What We Know About Gen Z Political Attitudes

Generation Z makes up 20.7 percent of the US population. It is more racially and ethnically diverse than previous generations and on track to be the most educated (Pew Research Center, 2020). Generation Z, along with the Millennials, are significantly different from older generations. Gen Z are progressive and pro-government, and generally see the country's growing racial and ethnic diversity as a good thing. For example, they are supportive of an activist government, with 7 out of 10 Gen Z-ers looking to the government to solve problems rather than individuals and businesses (Pew Research Center, 2020).

Specifically related to objectives of this research on democracy, there is relatively little research on the attitudes of the American Gen Z population. One study examined attitudes and perceptions about the importance of democratic engagement among a small sample of undergraduate students at one institution and found that the majority of the participants perceived democratic engagement to be important (Graham, 2020). A different study examined political tolerance in Gen Z using a variation of the “least preferred” approach, found that out of the 69 students completing the survey only 30% to 34% were politically intolerant (McBeth, 2022). A survey of 4000 college students to study their leanings on free speech found that a majority of students do not support free speech restrictions, but 41 percent draw the line at hate speech (Knight Foundation, 2019).

Gen Z-ers have demonstrated that their political leanings differ significantly from generations commonly gauged in opinion polls (Knight Foundation, 2018). However, we must conduct more intensive research to gauge the perceptions of Gen Zers regarding democracy, polarization, foundational inequity, and potential reforms. By understanding their attitudes and openness to reforms, we can contribute considerably to the missing body of knowledge regarding the generation that will significantly determine the future of American Democracy.

Methodology

The current study aims to directly gauge the attitudes that Gen Zers in America have toward the topics explored in the Literature Review: democracy and democratic reforms. The research study was designed to collect general introductory opinions on the state of democracy's health and equity and political polarization. It also introduces more complex topics (gerrymandering, the Electoral College, and Misinformation & Hate Speech) and surveys respondents' openness to potential reforms.

A mixed methods approach was employed to answer the research question. This approach, a quantitative survey followed by a qualitative focus group, allows us to systematically examine public attitudes in the survey but explore attitudes in more depth in the focus group. Mixed methods are a common type of political science research, as political scientists employ empirical and statistical analysis to support claims and use qualitative approaches to study mechanisms or the reasoning behind attitudes. Although there are various types of mixed methods, I selected the Sequential Explanatory mixed method design (Tashakkori and Creswell, 2007), instead of an Exploratory method because a quantifiable approach adds structure to guide the comprehensive research study instead of abstraction (Hesse-Biber, 2010). The research goal was to gather as many respondents as possible, and because of that, accessibility and convenience for the potential survey participants were a priority. A focus group with 6 participants was initiated during the completion stage of the survey and built on the questions asked in the survey. This two-step method was programmed to best correlate the simply numeral-based opinions and trends to the verbal testament that provides more complex reasoning required to conduct “vast opinion” political science research.

The study population consisted of individuals born between 1997 to 2012, with a focus on high schoolers and college students. There were no eligibility restrictions based on race/ethnicity, gender, geographic location, educational occupancy, or political party affiliations, to ensure that the responses could represent the diverse demographics of Gen Zers in America. However, the sample might be biased towards more politically engaged individuals who chose to complete the survey and may not represent Gen Zers more broadly.

The study specifically targeted Gen Z individuals and aimed to gather as many responses as possible from this demographic using quota sampling. Google Surveys was selected as the instrument due to its familiarity and easy accessibility for Gen Zers. The survey was designed to maintain anonymity, with no collection of email addresses,

mandatory response requirements, and limited responses to one per person. Data collection was conducted over a month, with the survey distributed via email to students at a Chicago Public high school, political science students at a nearby university, nearly 300 undergraduate student-led political clubs at colleges and extracurricular organizations in various states across the nation, as well as high-school AP Research students via 100 AP Research teachers across the United States. The survey concluded with an optional question regarding additional follow-up, allowing respondents to provide their name and email address if they wished to be contacted further. These email addresses were separated from the survey responses before analyses were conducted and stored separately.

The survey contained demographic questions pertaining to gender, race/ethnicity, geography, educational occupancy, and political affiliation. The substantive questions were organized into three main topics: democracy, democratic threats, and potential democratic reforms. To gauge opinions on democracy and democratic threats, respondents were asked to rank their level of agreement on a 1-5 scale. Likert Scale was utilized to measure respondents' level of concern regarding specific democratic threats. The survey also included multiple-choice questions related to potential democratic reforms to assess which solutions respondents found to be the most effective.

A total of 215 respondents completed the Google Survey, and 6 participants participated in the subsequent focus group. Survey analysis was performed on the entire data set without pre-grouping demographic variables, but trends within the responses of different groups were also analyzed. Conclusions were drawn using inferential analysis on the raw data collected. A single virtual focus group was conducted through Zoom with six confirmed participants who indicated their interest in participating through the Google Form questionnaire. During the focus group, participants were asked to elaborate on their reasoning behind their survey responses. While participants' political affiliations varied, no personal information was discussed during the conversation.

One of the limitations of the research method employed in this study was the relatively low number of responses from Gen Z post-graduates. Additionally, the survey may have been more accessible to politically active high school and undergraduate students, resulting in fewer responses from less politically active individuals in the Gen Z population. As a result, the study may not fully represent the views and opinions of the entire Gen Z population, particularly those who have graduated from educational institutions or are indifferent to the topic.

However, despite these limitations, the explanatory mixed methods design, which utilized both a Google Survey and a focus group, provided a comprehensive approach to the political topic under investigation. The approach of using quota sampling to gather as many Gen Z opinions as possible nationwide and from a diverse range of states was deemed the most effective method for data collection to address the research question at hand.

Results

The study results are organized into three sections. First, the demographic participation in the survey is shown (Tables 1-3). Next results on questions related to the state of American democracy are presented (Table 4). Finally, support and popularity of democratic reforms are explored Result (Table 5). In each table, the mean score for the full sample or a subsample is presented. For all survey questions, higher values indicate greater agreement with the statement. Readers may refer to Appendix B to read the complete survey questionnaire and the meaning of the 1-5 scale values for each question. Select focus group participant quotes are embedded in analysis but readers may refer to Appendix A to read the extended quotes.

Figures 1 and 2 display the variation between the Republican and Democrat mean scores per question from Table 4, Table 5, respectively. Support for specific reform solutions is shown in Figures 3-6.

Table 1: Survey Participation by Gender, Educational Occupancy, Geographic Region

Gender		Geographic Region			Total
		Urban	Suburban	Rural	
Male	Undergrad/ Post Grad	17	28	6	92
	High School	25	16		
Female	Undergrad/ Post Grad	13	13	5	109
	High School	47	31		
Non-Binary	Undergrad/ Post Grad		1	1	9
	High School	6	1		
Prefer Not To Say	Undergrad/ Post Grad				5
	High School	5			
Total		113	90	12	215

Table 2: Survey Participation by Race/Ethnicity

Race/ Ethnicity	% Respondents
White/Caucasian	65.6
Asian/Asian American	13
Hispanic, Latinx pr Spanish Origin	8.8
Mixed Racial/Ethnic Identity	7.9
Black or African American	2.3
Middle Eastern/ North African	0.9
Other	0.9
Indigenous/Native American	0.5

Table 3: Survey Participation by Political Party Affiliation

Political Party Affiliation	% Respondents
Strong Democrat	33
Lean Democrat	8.4
Not so strong Democrat	15.8
Independent	9.8
Strong Republican	14
Lean Republican	7.4
Not so strong Republican	4.2
Other/ Not Sure	7.4

The survey’s responses represented a diverse range of genders, geographical regions, and races/ethnicities (as shown in Table 1 and 2). The data collected in this study included marginalized groups that are often underrepresented in political science research, such as independents, moderates, and those who identified as non-binary or from mixed racial backgrounds. The majority of the respondents lived in either urban or suburban regions (Table 1), identified as White/Caucasian (Table 2), and identified as Democrats (Table 3). However, a significant portion of respondents, about 42.8%, identified with other political parties. Although the sample size of 215 respondents cannot be an exact representation of the national Gen Z population, the demographics of this sample directionally represent the demographics and affiliations of the general Gen Z population.

Table 4: Survey “General Democracy” Questionnaire Section Mean Result (1-5)

	Overall Mean	Democrats	Independents/ Others	Republicans
How important is it to you that America is a healthy democracy?	4.47	4.68	4.19	4.16
How strong do you think democracy is in the United States?	2.76	2.72	2.51	2.69
Would you not vote for a candidate who did not stand for democratic values?	3.05	3.14	2.97	2.91
How much of a concern is nationwide political polarization for you?	4.03	4.09	3.78	4.05
Do you think our democracy is inequitable or inclusive?	2.52	1.96	2.51	3.78

As shown in Table 4, all respondents viewed democracy as important, but were concerned about its current state in America. On the importance of democracy, all groups (mean = 4.47), Democrats (4.68), Republicans (4.16), and Independents (4.19), landed in the 4–5-point range, indicating it was "pretty important to very important." These average mean scores revealed a bipartisan agreement on the importance of democracy in America by Gen Z. One

Focus Group (FG) responded summarized, “I would say it's definitely very important to me in the sense that our institutions are functionally a democracy...”

There was also bipartisan agreement on the current state of democracy, with an overall mean of 2.76, conveying that democracy was performing "slightly poorly to moderate" to them. Respondents expressed that although American democracy is still a leader on the world stage, it is flawed since some institutions are outdated, have caused disenfranchisement, and are under threat because of political actors. One FG respondent commented, “I know that in the United States there is a lot of disenfranchisement that needs to be addressed.” Another stated, “As Gen Z, we're growing up in a time where our democratic institutions and democratic norms are under attack to probably one of the greatest degrees we've seen in American history.”

However, not all Gen Z believe that disenfranchisement and voting access is of concern. “I think we're stronger than ever. Voting is the easiest it's ever been in history. If you wanna vote from home, you can do that. If you wanna send in a ballot, you can do that. That's all accessible now. And it's actually good that we're not a true democracy and that we're a representative democracy,” a FG participant maintained. Generally, though, not all Gen Zers share this optimistic outlook. As one participant summed up, “It's not super strong, but it's not weak. We are still world leaders in democracy measures. However, democracy is not the strongest it has been, specifically with threats to, to institutions like we saw under the previous president.”

Regarding concern of political polarization, Democrats (4.05) and Republicans (4.09) alike had a similar mean score, mostly ranking it as "pretty concerning." Gen Zers demonstrated knowledge and interest in addressing this political polarization, tying it back to misinformation, news outlets, social media echo chambers, and the post-2016 political climate. Reflecting on the issue, one participant stated, "Huge concern. I think people have lost the ability to engage meaningfully in political conversation. I think Gen Z has a massive role to play in correcting this." Another FG participant echoed the concern of misinformation adding that “A lot of people are misinformed, and it has to do a lot with media outlets and stuff. So I do think that there's an amount of polarization like now that's dangerous because it's not based in fact.”

As shown in Figure 1, while there was general agreement in the views of Democrats and Republicans, there was a point of divergence on the topic of democracy's inequality and inclusivity. Democrats ranked democracy as not being inclusive (1.98), whereas Republicans ranked democracy to be "for the most part" inclusive (3.78).

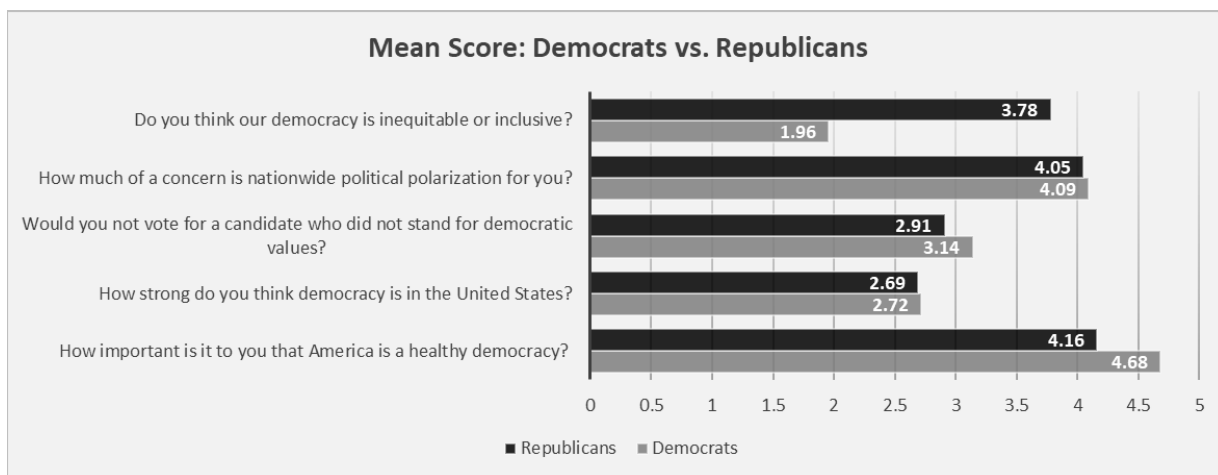


Figure 1: Democrats and Republican Mean Score Comparison from Table 4

The relative common ground on the importance/state of democracy and concern on political polarization convey that the Gen Z population might be more receptive than other generations to safeguarding the integrity and

function of democratic institutions and mitigating the adverse effects of political polarization in government. However, there remains an ideological divide in Democrat and Republican assessment of democracy inclusivity. Next, we explore the results related to Gen Z attitudes towards democratic reform.

Table 5: Democratic Reform: Survey Mean Results (1-5)

	Overall Mean	Democrats	Independents/ Others	Republicans
Do you think American democracy requires reforms?	4.28	4.59	4.08	3.71
Is gerrymandering a concern to you?	4.06	4.30	4.05	3.53
Do you believe the Electoral College should be reformed?	3.58	4.24	3.71	2.02
How concerning is hate speech and misinformation?	3.86	4.38	3.70	2.80
How active are you likely to be to voice your support for reforms?	3.50	3.94	3.16	2.75

As shown in Table 5, the average mean score of 4.28 indicated that a majority of respondents, regardless of political affiliation, agreed that American democracy required reform. However, when specifically asked about the three types of reform topics (gerrymandering, Electoral College, and Misinformation/Hate Speech), the scores were lower. Further as shown in Figure 2, there was greater variation in concern scores between Democrats and Republicans. Though many are open to the idea of reforms, Gen Zers are not overwhelmingly backing any particular reform that was presented.

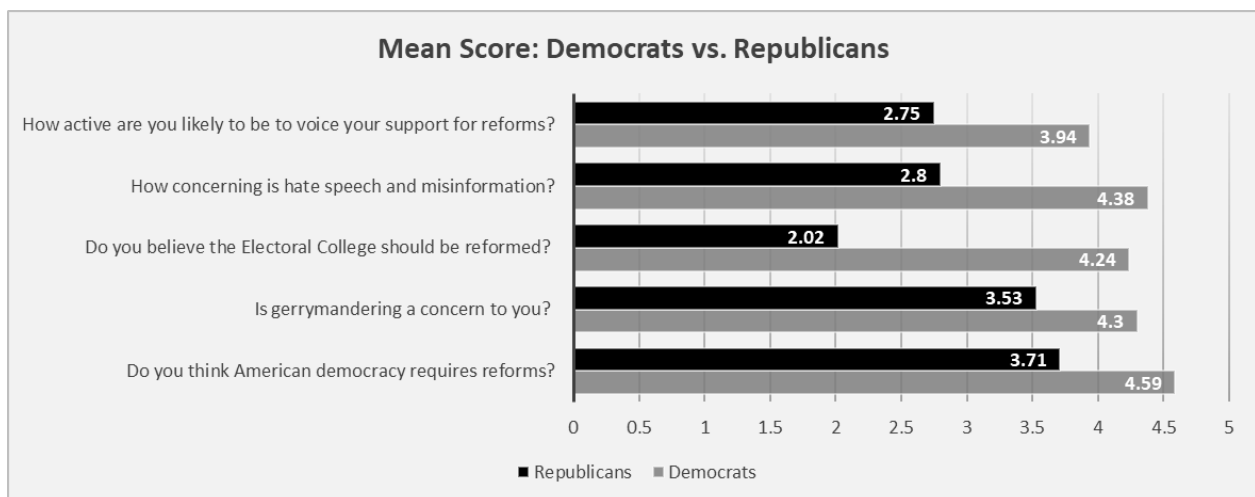


Figure 2: Democrats and Republicans Mean Score Comparison from Table 5

Gerrymandering was the most popular reform topic amongst all political party affiliations, with an average mean score of 4.06, including slightly above moderate concern from Republicans for the issue (score of 3.53). Contrastingly, the Electoral College reform question had the highest variation between Democrats (4.24) and Republicans (2.02) in the study. Likewise, Democrats were most concerned about misinformation and hate speech with a score of 4.38, compared to Republicans, who scored 2.8.

Gen Z Democrats were more inclined to voice their support for reforms and changes to the system (with a score of 3.94) than their Republican counterparts (with a score of 2.75), who tended to be more interested in preserving the status quo. Moreover, there was a positive correlation between the strength of partisanship and the degree of interest in voicing support for reforms. Additional sub-analysis showed that strong partisans (whether Democrat or Republican) had a score of 3.73, while not-so-strong partisans had a score of 3.3. This suggests that those who are strongly affiliated with a particular party are more likely to be active in civic education and action within the system. One FG respondent suggested, “There could be better ways to teach people about the voting process. I think it would be useful to like practice doing research on candidates because it's something that you don't really learn in other classes.”

The FG participants explained that Gen Z's apathy towards democratic institutions and process reforms may stem from the perception that such changes are less impactful and more mundane than hard-hitting socio-economic policies. “Gen Z people care a lot about things that affect specifically students, people our age and not so much about like the government institution because it seems less easy to manipulate...” one respondent pointed out. Nevertheless, some participants recognized the long-term value of focusing on norms. Another stated, “ I think in the long-term it's as valuable to focus on these norms than necessarily immediate policy gains.”

Additional variations based on demographic factors are shown in Table 6 and Table 7 for relevant survey questions.

Table 6: Relevant Questions Analyzed with Geographic Region Demographics

	Overall Mean	Rural	Suburban	Urban
Is gerrymandering a concern to you?	4.06	4.00	3.96	4.15
Do you believe the Electoral College should be reformed?	3.58	2.75	3.30	3.88

Rural respondents (2.75) were less inclined to reform the Electoral College than other regions, which could back the argument that the Electoral College disproportionately empowers rural voters.

Table 7: Relevant Questions Analyzed with Race/Ethnicity Demographics

	Do you think our democracy is inequitable or inclusive?	How concerning is hate speech and misinformation?
Overall Mean	2.52	3.86
White/Caucasian	2.55	3.79
Non-White	2.46	3.99
Asian/Asian American	2.64	4.21
Black or African American	2.80	3.40
Hispanic, Latinx, or Spanish Origin	2.47	3.63
Other/ Mixed/ Minority	2.14	4.14

The topics of democracy's inequality and inclusivity as well as concern with hate speech and misinformation were points of divergence based on race and ethnicity. Non-white participants had a slightly lower inclusivity rating and a slightly higher concern for hate speech and misinformation than white participants. In particular, the Asian demographic and other minority/ mixed groups had the greatest concern on these issues.

Next, we analyze the various solutions and reforms and their support amongst Gen Z.

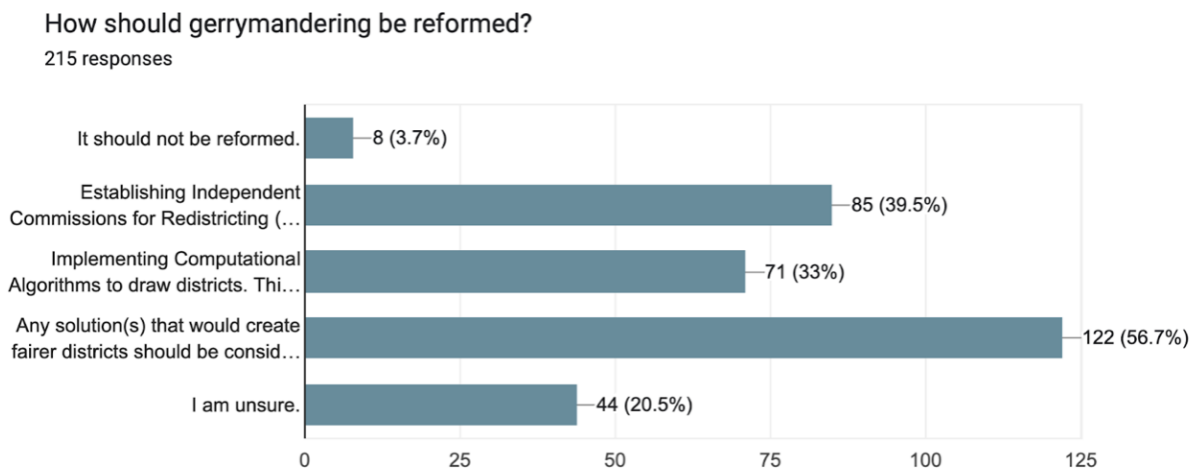


Figure 3: Gerrymandering Reform Solutions

Gerrymandering was the most popular reform topic with support for change across all political parties, with an average mean score of 4.06. Figure 3 shows that both establishing independent commissions for redistricting and implementing computational algorithms to draw districts to mitigate human biases received strong support in terms of Gerrymandering reforms. However, most respondents indicated they believed any solutions that would create fairer districts should be considered and implemented. “I think yeah, definitely the best way would be using technology that just creates based on the size, based on the population, whatever, like using AI,” one FG participant argued. However, participants acknowledged that even redistricting via AI presented limitations and challenges. “I feel like the issues have been making this purely a problem of technology. With AI or even with just like reg traditional programming is that human biases get sort of encoded into it. So that's sort of a limit. I feel like a start would definitely be independent redistricting commissions that cannot be overridden by the legislature,” a participant expounded.

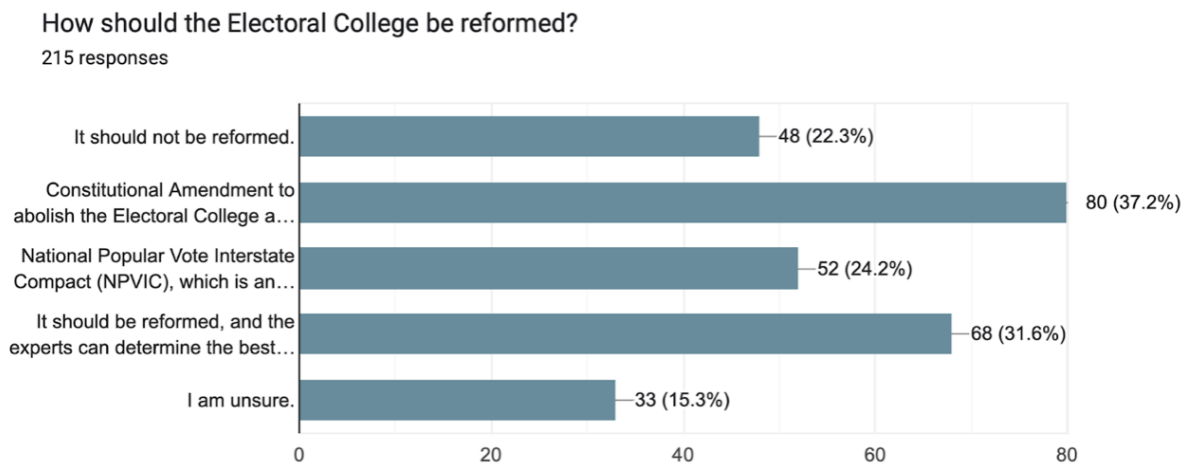


Figure 4: Electoral College Reform

The Electoral College reform question had the highest division between Democrats (4.24) and Republicans (2.02) in the study. Figure 4 shows that nearly a quarter of respondents said that the Electoral College should not be reformed. The rest were either open to the two offered solutions – abolishing it by amendment and National Popular Vote Interstate Compact – or having experts determine the best reform option. FG conversations emphasized that the Electoral College was outdated, caused political apathy, and should not determine the presidential election. One participant asserted, “I definitely think that it should be reformed and replaced by a popular vote. The issue is that almost every state is winner takes all, and some of the competitive ones happen to lean one way.”

Another participant expressed their disillusionment with the Electoral College, stating “I think it really doesn't need to exist. It's very disheartening to know that people don't even bother voting because they know that essentially their voice doesn't really matter.” However, participants also noted that reforms for the matter, such as a constitutional amendment, were unlikely to occur and were challenging to implement. They further noted that “There's the national interstate popular vote compact that's gaining some steam, which the Supreme Court would probably strike down anyway, but that's one way to sort of get around it. To actually properly deal with it would be a constitutional amendment but there's no incentive for however many 30 states to do so.”

Moreover, its "mundane-institutional" nature of the issue also made it less of a priority than Gerrymandering or other policies, particularly for low-income students. As one participant shared, “I also do think coming from a low-income background, like policy trumps a lot of the other issues that I personally have seen in current American politics. And so I think that everything that is in relation to voting is a lot more prominent for me.”

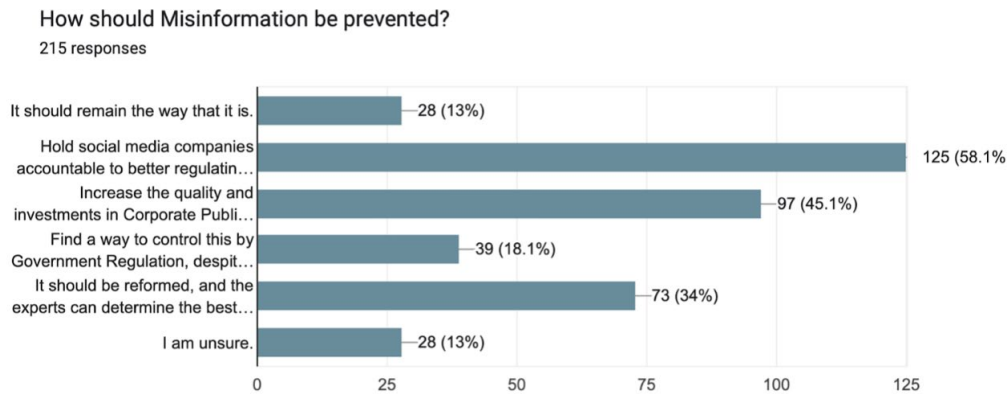


Figure 5: Misinformation Reform

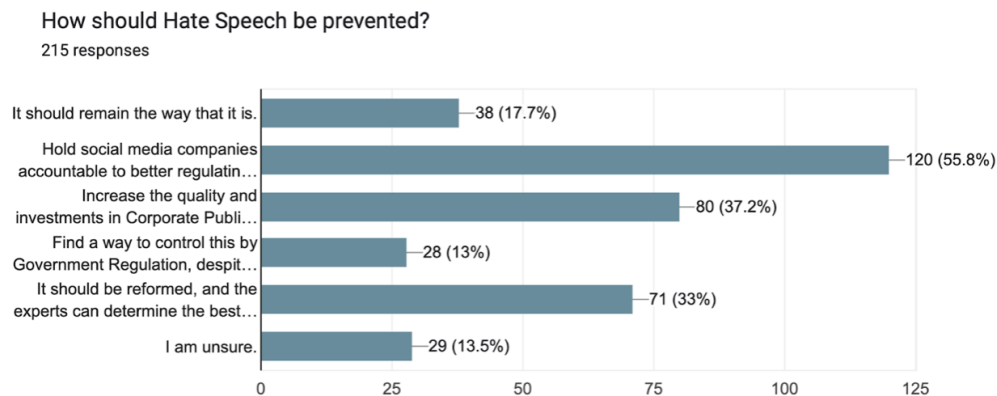


Figure 6: Hate Speech Reform

The survey on Hate Speech/Misinformation revealed some of the most insightful takeaways highlighting subtopics of bipartisan agreement and dissonance. Democrats were most concerned about the issue, with a score of 4.38, compared to Republicans, who scored 2.8. Holding Social Media companies accountable and increasing the quality and investments in Corporate Public Broadcasting were the two most dominant reform selections, which are especially relevant considering recent headlines regarding speech regulations on media companies.

The focus group pointed out the importance of the first amendment and not policing speech, as policing hate speech could encroach over free speech and backfire. One participant stated, “I don't think that policing of radicalism would be effective. I think it would drive people further away from the spotlight where they can be challenged. The answer to bad speech is more speech in the sense that it allows us to combat those ideas.” Another participant supported the sentiment stating, “I think that there is merit in making sure that misinformation is not spread, I also do think that moderating content like hate speech is a very fine line.” Still participants argued that some measures to police speech could be acceptable and necessary. “I do think that an extent of policing is not too invasive. I think that would be necessary in some situations just because thinking back to insurrection,” one participant shared. The finding directly reinforces the Knight Foundation’s survey assessment on First Amendment views that the majority of college students generally support the protection of the First Amendment rights. This sentiment was shared by a conservative FG participant who asserted, “I don't think anything should be done. It's a free country. You can find information anywhere. You don't have to just watch the news to get your information. If they are like the biggest ones that are spreading

fake news you can do your own research.” Still, however, both Republicans and Democrats attributed susceptibility to misinformation as a result of the lack of media literacy and civic research education taught in schools. Several FG participants agreed with the assertion that “Everyone should to some extent receive some media literacy because like, that's the primary way that people receive their education about politics.”

FG participants also discussed other reforms, not presented in the survey, related to voting systems and accessibility, such as Ranked Choice Voting which has been implemented in state and local elections across the US. “Ranked Choice Voting not only allows us to have a more representative house of Representatives, especially if we use multi-member districts, but it leads us towards more moderate candidates,” explained a participant. Mandatory voting, as seen in Australia, was another reform possibility explored in the focus group. “There are definitely a handful of countries around the world which implement mandatory voting. I think that having a system in which there is a strong incentive to vote in every election would make the system more represented and would most likely lead to a fairer system as well,” explained another.

In summary, the research yielded some significant findings on Gen Z views on American democracy and reform. The highlights of the research included bipartisan support and common ground on democratic values and the need for democratic reforms, as shown in Tables 4 and 5. “The best future is one in which everyone is engaged and in which we have a system that is fair,” one FG participant expressed. Specifically, they supported solutions such as establishment of AI or Independent Review Commissions to draw districts in response to Gerrymandering, holding social media companies and broadcasting channels that propagate misinformation accountable, and avoiding infringing on the first amendment right by policing hate speech. There was divisiveness on the Electoral College, and the respondents acknowledged a low realistic probability of change. Though many were open to the possibility of reforms, there were a minority who remained resistant to any reforms. As one FG participant voiced, “I have a lot more concerns about things I do not want to be reformed. Like, along the lines of like when we were talking about hate speech, I don't want anything that's gonna encroach the first amendment or the second amendment too. I don't want things to be changed and I want ideas like the electoral college to be kept.”

The survey data indicated a bipartisan resounding call to action to recognize the somewhat poor state of American democracy and bipartisan recommendations to increase civic engagement educational courses and media literacy classes, taught in school, to combat misinformation susceptibility. One participant shared that “Schools can do a lot more... In my experience, I don't think I've ever been in a class that kind of talked about politics really.” Building on the idea, another participant suggested “There could be better ways to teach people about the voting process...It would be useful to practice doing research on candidates because it's something that you don't really learn in other classes.”

Conclusion

This study presents a comprehensive analysis of Gen Z opinions regarding imminent threats to political institutions and the future of democracy. The vast amount of data collected provides an in-depth portfolio of the concerns held by this generation. Their concerns are resonant with the alarms raised by political scientists and a population of older generation Americans. Gen Zers, spanning the political spectrum, are generally worried about the state of American democracy, with many open to reform unethical voter inequity practices like Gerrymandering, and seek solutions to combat the rise of misinformation.

Nevertheless, it is essential to recognize the limitations of this study. First, it is worth noting that this was a convenience sample of Gen Zers. The included respondents, while diverse in many respects, may not fully capture the diversity of views among this population. For instance, there could have been more representation from those living in rural regions. Only 12 responses were received from rural inhabitants compared to a majority of suburban/urban respondents. Likewise, respondents may have been more politically interested than non-respondents. Second, the form used to gather data allowed respondents to identify with political parties on a broader affiliation scale than just “Democrat, Republican, or Other.” However, to avoid overcomplicating the political party variable section and gather direct

and cohesive takeaways, the analysis grouped all Democrat options, Republican options, and Other/Independent options into three categories. Doing so could have diminished some nuance in the findings within the political parties, as the views of Not so Strong Democrats and Strong Democrats are not homogenous.

The most significant limitation in this study was the unproportional balance of Democrat and Republican voices in the focus group, with a 5:1 Democrat to Republican ratio. It is less likely this ratio represents the full Gen Z population. Although the research was able to gauge various remarks and reactions from the conservative focus group participants, more conservative voices would have enabled more heterogeneous perspectives and opportunities to understand conservative Gen Zers.

This study provides valuable insights into the concerns held by Gen Z regarding the state of American democracy. While the limitations must be acknowledged, the findings present a nuanced and relevant portrait of the current political climate as seen through the eyes of this generation.

This research suggests that there is a pressing need for democratic and institutional reforms, especially in areas of broad support. Among the reforms that had popularity among Gen Z participants of the study, is the use of AI to draw congressional districts, which has been implemented in redistricting software and is being considered as a solution for abnormally drawn states like Ohio and North Carolina. Independent Review Commissions have already been implemented to some extent in over 20 states and are gaining momentum (Imamura, 2022). The Electoral College, although unlikely to change in the near future, remains a highly divisive and widely disliked institutional practice. Conversations around the concerns of misinformation and hate speech are also increasingly relevant and visible and, as highlighted by the responses of Gen Z, it is crucial to hold social media and television channels that propagate harm to institutions accountable.

A significant takeaway from the research, as identified by focus group members from both the Democratic and Republican parties, is the need to increase state and federal educational standards for government/civic engagement courses and research/media literacy education. Currently, there are no mandatory federal standards for civics and social science classes, and each state has its own set of criteria. Shockingly, only eight states require students to complete a state-mandated government/civics test. Even among motivated students enrolled in rigorous government courses such as Advanced Placement (AP) Government, the 2022 results indicate that over 75% of students received a score of 1-3 (out of 5), indicating a lack of adequate understanding of the material. In terms of media literacy education, Illinois was the first state to mandate media literacy in high school curricula in 2021. However, more state budget allocation is needed to fund and provide resources for the curriculum, and other states must follow suit to instill crucial skills for high school students in a digital age. By increasing local and federal educational funding and mandates for government/civic education and media literacy, Gen Zers can be equipped to contribute to and elevate American democracy and protect themselves from misinformation. Future research should focus on determining concrete measures and mandates to be implemented by state and federal governments to improve either government/civic education or media literacy amongst this generation. The 2024 US Presidential election will mark a prominent chapter in which developing civic engagement interest amongst youth and media literacy skills at school, especially during times of circulating misinformation online, will be of the utmost importance.

The upcoming generation of voters, Gen Zers, possess the potential to communicate their reservations regarding problematic and antiquated democratic institutions to their representatives at the district, state, and federal levels. Given the evolution of interpretations of the first amendment and freedom of speech across generations, the Gen Z cohort can redefine the scope of these constitutional rights to accommodate a digitalized and increasingly extremist society. Additionally, Gen Zers have the power to transform the political climate, thereby influencing the attitudes and behaviors of their representatives and shaping the state of democracy, either amplifying or reducing polarization and its deleterious effects. The study identified Gen Z's priorities for democracy, including combatting the impact of social media algorithms, utilizing AI and Independent Review Commissioners to increase voting inclusivity, and expanding mandatory government and media literacy courses. Though a formidable undertaking, by advocating for institutional reforms, increasing civic engagement, and reducing polarization, Gen Z has the potential to revitalize American democracy and steer the nation in a more promising and cohesive direction.

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